Sixth grade students at a local elementary school are helping INL and Mayo Clinic study whether vertical workstations impact student activity, attentiveness and weight.

INL teams with Mayo Clinic, local school for ergonomic study

By Rebecca Jones , *INL Communications & Governmental Affairs*

Classroom fidgeting may actually help students focus rather than distracting from the lesson — that's the hypothesis being tested with a new study of vertical workstations in a local sixth grade classroom.

INL study lead Brad Snedden hopes the study will provide data about workstation effectiveness.

The study — a collaborative effort between Idaho National Laboratory, Mayo Clinic and Hope Lutheran School — is designed to examine how changing a student's workstation can impact activity, attentiveness and weight.

The new workstations are similar to standing desks used in many work environments because of their positive ergonomic impacts. Although many schools have purchased such workstations under the assumption that they may improve activity and attentiveness and reduce student obesity, no formal studies on the effectiveness of these desks have been performed.

Teacher Jim Oloff has noticed an impact on his ability to establish and maintain eye contact with students at the higher desks.

"Schools are becoming increasingly concerned with the rise in student obesity and inactivity, and they have been trying to find opportunities to help students become healthier," explained INL study lead Brad Snedden. "We hope that our impact analysis study will provide some data about one option that may have significant impact on both student health and academic performance."

Hope Lutheran officials became interested in vertical workstations after hearing about positive impacts from schools in Minnesota and Wisconsin, said sixth grade teacher Jim Oloff.

"We were intrigued with the possible positive impact the workstations were having on student attentiveness, classroom management and academic performance," he said.

The study idea came to INL when Laurel Flynn — an employee in the laboratory's Environment, Safety and Health directorate and parent of a Hope Lutheran School student — heard about the workstations from a school administrator. Because Flynn's organization deals with employee ergonomics, she was interested in the concept.

The new workstations are adjusted for students' heights and allow them to sit, stand, or swing their feet on the fidget bar.

Beginning this month, sixth-grade students at Hope Lutheran School will be using new vertical workstation desks that were provided by contributions from Volm Companies Inc., Yellowstone Plastics and Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. Oloff, the students' teacher, has already noticed that he has an easier time maintaining eye contact with the students in the taller desks.

INL will use data from class observations, regular weigh-ins and pedometers to answer questions about the workstations' impact on student attentiveness, body weight, daily activity, and fatigue or discomfort. The data from this impact analysis study will be analyzed by INL and the Mayo Clinic's Non-exercise Activity Thermogenesis (NEAT) lab, which studies how calories are expended in varying populations and environments to improve active health.

"We are very enthusiastic to be part of this project," NEAT lab manager Gabe Koepp told assembled parents and reporters at a recent press conference. "We hope to expand this type of endeavor in Idaho and the nation."

See coverage of the study from the Idaho State Journal, CBS affiliate KIDK or ABC affiliate KIFI.

Read an update about the study results.

Feature Archive